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WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

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May 12, 1980

Mr. Warren Christopher
Deputy Secretary of State
Department of State Rm. 7220
Washington D.C. 20520

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

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Date _____ Declassify on _____ Reason _____

Dear Mr. Christopher;

At the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) we have been following closely the situation in Argentina for many years. Although our primary interest has been monitoring the human rights situation, we are aware that human rights is not the only concern at stake in U.S.-Argentine relations. Nevertheless, we believe that a shift in U.S. human rights policy at this point for reasons of strategic expediency would have a negative impact on all aspects of long term U.S.-Argentine relations.

Since 1976, Argentina has been a test case for U.S. human rights policy, as a country where both the administration and Congress took a leadership role in expressing U.S. repudiation of the grave abuses of power of the military regime. This policy towards Argentina has had important repercussions; the U.S. disassociated itself with the excesses of the regime; the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission was invited to visit the country and has recently issued the most definitive report on the human rights situation in Argentina and certain important prisoners, such as Jacobo Timmerman, were released.

Presently it appears that U.S. policy towards Argentina is under reevaluation. Increasingly warm U.S.-Argentine relations cause alarm and some would suggest that our human rights policy harms other strategic U.S. interests in the Southern Cone. It is important to consider the validity of these claims and measure what could be gained and lost by a change in U.S. policy towards Argentina.

The Argentine government would undoubtedly interpret any change in U.S. policy as the direct result of their decision to not join the grain embargo and to pursue closer relations with the USSR. The clear message the U.S. sends to Argentina and other countries with a policy shift at this crucial moment is that the expedient method to soften the U.S. human rights stance is to improve relations with the Soviet Union. The USSR and Argentina presently have a mutually beneficial trade and diplomatic relationship, based on complementary production patterns and a common interest in silencing human rights inquiries in international fora. This relationship exposes the contradictions of both regimes, a fact not lost to many Argentines. To suggest that this mutually advantageous relationship could develop further, with Argentina becoming an

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outpost of Soviet power in the Southern Cone is ludicrous. Argentina has traditionally carried out an independent foreign policy, adept at maneuvers to play one superpower off against the other, as in the present case. Reading the Argentine press, it is evident that the Argentine government is proud of having exploited the present political conjuncture to their own benefit.

Argentine non-participation in the grain embargo should not be attributed to human rights policy. The USSR is an important new market for Argentine grain, and Argentina can be expected to pursue that lucrative market regardless of the U.S. human rights stance. This same reasoning was expressed by Minister of Economics, Martinez de Hoz, in his recent visit to the U.S.

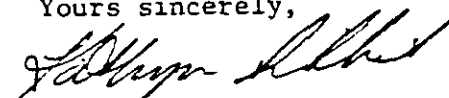
Although it appears that little could be gained by a change in present U.S. policy, much could be lost. An Argentine political figure of a centrist opposition party said recently that a softening of human rights policy at this point would cause the U.S. to lose the credibility it has built up over the last four years. Another Argentine commented that public opinion in Argentina, historically anti-American but recently more supportive of the U.S. position, would relapse into cynicism about U.S. motives should the U.S. back off now on its human rights policy. Opposition political parties and public opinion are factors that both the U.S. government and the Argentine military regime can currently afford to ignore, but sooner or later they are political forces that must be taken into account.

Although the number of disappearances in Argentina has decreased over the last year, serious abuses of human rights continue. The OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission Report and other recent publications by Amnesty International clearly document that the highest levels of the Argentine government were cognizant of decisions and actions to abduct, detain, torture and kill thousands of Argentine citizens. Daily at WOLA we talk and hear from the family members of the imprisoned, disappeared and dead. They tell us that the problem of the disappeared and their families is a time bomb that will eventually explode in the faces of the military. What has happened in Argentina since 1976 is no mere violation of human rights. It is a mini-holocaust, unleashed by the Argentine military against its own citizens. Such a government, maintained only by continued repression and use of force, is an inherently unstable ally for the United States. Long-term U.S. interests can surely not be served by relinquishing conscientious U.S. policy as a diplomatic card in negotiations with the Argentine military.

In conclusion, what the U.S. would gain from a policy shift on U.S. human rights policy towards Argentina at this point is doubtful. What we would lose in terms of credibility, prestige and a long-term contribution to stability and justice in the Southern Cone is both serious and immediate. We thought it was important to express our opinion on the topic at this crucial point in U.S. -Argentine relations. Thanking you for your attention, we remain

cc: Patricia Derian
Robert Pastor
Edward Kennedy

Yours sincerely,



Kathryn A. Sikkink,
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